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ABSTRACT

Since a fundamental problem of acting--fear--is a fundamental human problem, the basic job of acting teachers is to help their students become the kind of people who can act. Acting teachers need to help their students cast off their fears, free their bodies and their imaginations, and learn all the skills of self-knowledge, self-control, and perception so inhibited by fear and by the ego-trap that fear generates. The way acting teachers can accomplish all these things is by going to the experts in the fundamental sciences and technologies of human behavior to get the necessary information, tools, and skills. Without necessarily adopting the notion of therapeutic techniques, acting teachers need to adopt the therapeutic concept of intervention--interacting with another person to change that person's behavior, beliefs, and attitudes. The challenge of such a teaching attitude is that acting teachers will need to re-educate themselves, learning techniques such as Alexander Lowen's bioenergetics, T'ai Chi, anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, first aid, CPR, speech science, neurobiology, kinesics, proxemics, and semantics. These studies are essential to acting teachers because they presume to tinker with people's bodies and minds at profound levels. (RL)

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THE USE OF THERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES IN ACTOR TRAINING

I have good news and bad news. Two very good things have happened to actor training recently:

1) We now seem to understand (most of us) that the PhD in no way guarantees a person is qualified for the subtle, complex, and dangerous job of teaching acting. This is a very important realization; we may wonder why it was so long coming. It's true that we immediately fell into an equally silly belief that any professional actor or anyone with an MFA in acting is qualified for the job, but we seem to have caught on rather quickly that what one needs to know to act and what one needs to know to teach acting are two very different things and so we're casting off that error too. Clearly, the qualifications of the acting teacher are very special.

2) We also seem to have grasped that actor training has very little to do, directly, with theatre. What we do to make

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fine actors of ourselves has very little to do with the tricks and traditions of theatre and much to do with the fundamental problems of human behavior, of social adjustment, of cognitive and affective skills.

The fundamental problem in acting, it appears, is fear. Nothing so trivial as stage-fright; that's easy to handle. I mean the deep-seated fears which control most of our behavior, even though we tend to deny their existence. This fear is the ultimate source of every problem I encounter in actors, imaginative or expressive. It inhibits imagination and creativity, distracts us from our fantasy, and makes rigid puppets of our bodies, etcetera.

But this is not uniquely a theatrical problem. Fear is the fundamental human problem. It is the price we pay for consciousness and for our power of imagination, our flexibility and our ability to conceive alternative possibilities. Acting simply presents us with a heightened instance of the basic problem of being on-the-spot, vulnerable, and unsure.

We have learned this lesson. We now understand that, if we are to really help our students, we must reach far beyond theatre for our training techniques. Our job is not to teach acting so much as it is to help students become the kind of people who can act, to help them cast off their fears, free their bodies and their imagination and learn all the skills of self-knowledge, self-control, and perception which are so inhibited by fear and by the ego-trap which fear generates.

If we're to do this responsibly and effectively, we're going to have to go to the experts in the fundamental sciences and technologies of human behavior for our information, our tools, and our skills.

I have a sign on my classroom wall which reads "You can't make theatre out of theatre." The good news is that this idea is more widely understood every year. Theatre people are reaching out. They're adventuring in territories we didn't even know existed ten years ago and they're bringing back treasures that promise to redeem the inadequacies of our earlier approaches to actor-training. Which brings us to the bad news.

This new type of training presents us with two major problems:

1) Most of our graduate programs are not able to prepare teachers for this new work, or, if able, not so inclined. After all, faculty schedules now are full. Who, in our area is able and free to teach this broad new range of courses? And if we are able and free, what are we to trim from the students' programs to make room for the new material? History? Lit? Theory and Crit? Directing? Clearly, some major changes have to be made in our graduate training. But it won't happen soon, particularly in this period of financial exigency. For the time being, it seems that acting teachers will have to train themselves. They'll have to travel far and spend lots of time and money to do it.

2) Many of the new techniques are dangerous in the hands of anyone not fully trained. This concern has been particularly intense for some of the most productive new techniques because they are drawn from the psychological therapies. The ideas of psychology and therapy both create a lot of apprehension in the trade and many acting teachers have justified the concern

by careless and under-informed use of the techniques. Obviously we need some sort of standard for the educational use of these potentially dangerous techniques. Our intent today is to initiate a dialogue on the subject with the hope that it may lead to standards for more responsible and productive use of these valuable new tools.

I want to begin by casting off the notion of "therapeutic techniques" altogether. It is too narrow and deceptive. You may be surprised to hear that therapists hardly ever use it because they know that it is not feasible or meaningful to separate human interactions cleanly into those which are therapeutic and those which are not. Therapy is the effort to help. Any interaction may be therapeutic just as any interaction may be destructive. The impact of any interaction depends not only on what is done but by whom, to whom, in what manner, when, and in what circumstances.

So cast off the notion of therapeutic techniques and adopt instead the concept therapists find most useful: the idea of intervention. Any time one of us interacts with another in order to change the other's behavior, beliefs, attitudes, he is intervening in that other's life and so incurrs a responsibility which must not be borne carelessly.

But can such a broad view be useful? So conceived, intervention includes all teaching and all directing. Right ! The same dangers apply, potentially, in all our interventions. Admitedly, affective and physiological interventions present the threat of more immediate and debilitating damage than do cognitive interventions. But then it is all complicated even more by two facts: what is intended as cognitive intervention may well have high affective and physiological

impact instead, or as well...and so on in all directions. Also, we may actually intervene without intending to. Passive intervention or intervention by omission may well be as potent as the most aggressive, demanding intervention. In other words, it's a touchy game. When we set ourselves up in positions of high power and influence, such as teaching or directing, we had better understand that we're walking on eggs and must tread gently and knowledgeably.

Recall that in the Hipocratic Oath, which most physicians still swear to at graduation, one of the most significant promises is that, above all, the doctor's intervention will do no harm. This takes priority over the possibility of helping. So it should be with us. The standard should apply to <u>all</u> our behavior with students, from using the Bioenergetic stress positions to the look we give the student as we pass in the hall, from the memory of emotion exercise to the request that an actor speak louder.

Every intervention is potentially valuable and potentially destructive. Which impact it actually has will depend on our skill. Of course no amount of skill can guarantee that we will never do harm. We will make mistakes. We will be destructive. But we must do what can be done to minimize the risk.

Here are some first shots at articulating our standard. The crucial requirements are knowledge and perceptual skill, (sensitivity, if you like, to the impact of our interventions). Both are hard to come by, the knowledge because of its bulk and the perceptual skill because of its subtlety.

I believe that the following are <u>minimal</u> requirements for the knowledge component; for any intervention we must know:

1) what the specific intended impact of the intervention

is (we allow ourselves no vaguely conceived techniques which seem "generally good"; they are both pedagogically and ethically taboo);

2) any particular dangers of the technique;

3) how to judge the actual impact of the intervention (the hardest part of all and the most important);

4) the psychic and/or somatic mechanisms by which the intervention is expected to do its work.

That's a tall order. It takes an overwhelmingly bulky and rigorous education to bring us up to this minimal standard and it prohibits us from trying many of the most appealing new tools as soon as we would like. For instance, this standard tells the director that he must not call for more volume from an actor unless he knows how this greater volume may be produced and unless his ear is trained to recognize any potentially damaging errors in voice production the actor may make in response.

The demon in this story is ROUTINE! It subverts our best intentions. I want to belabor this point a bit because I believe that routine does more damage than anything else to our actor training and to the reputability of our profession. Simply put, any technique is a routine for you if you fail to meet any of the minimal requirements of understanding and perception just listed and/or:

1) if you allow yourself to fall into the unreasonable belief that any particular technique is, in itself, good or bad, useful or not, or

2) if you believe that any technique has a particular, guaranteed impact, forgetting that the impact of any interaction is a function of all parties involved, of the time, manner, and situation.

I believe that there can be no syllabus set for actor training. Goals, yes; a repertoire of techniques, yes; but each student must be seen uniquely and techniques selected according to his needs with the utmost perspicacity. Anything else seems to me to be routine, unproductive, and dangerous.

When we go to a convention workshop in Bioenergetic technique and, after 45 minutes of necessarily incomplete demonstration, run home to use the techniques in our classroom, we doom ourselves to routine and our students to worse. When we participate in a weekend workshop in Theatre Games and learn all of the games but none of the mechanisms by which they purportedly work or the likely impacts, and then integrate these games into our classes, we're doomed to routine. If we read Oscar Icazo's Psycho-Calesthenics and use them in class without a full knowledge of the underlying physiological mechanisms and tolerances and purposes, we are trapped in routine. In these cases, our students are helpless pawns in the hands of teachers who want to do their learning on the job by trial and error. At best, the student will have fun and learn a little. At worst, he may be maimed psychologically or physically. It has happened.

We mustn't settle for routine, but neither may we evade the problem by sticking with the old, supposedly-safe methods. First, because they too present risks and require more knowledge than we have admitted, and then because they just don't do the job adequately. We have the new techniques. We know what, potentially, they can do, that they can make actor training, for the first time, a truly productive effort, that they can free us from the need to admit that "acting really can't be taught."

We must not turn away from the promise; and the risks come with the territory. The challenge has been put to this generation of acting teachers, to us. Now we'll see what we're made of. The burden of self-re-education will be tremendous in time, effort, and money. My time with Alexander Lowen (the top man in Bioenergetics) cost me $60. an hour. My Alexander Technique work was moderate; only $25. an hour. T'ai Chi training was a bargain at $20. an hour. All essential, and that's just a beginning. There's anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, first aid, CPR, speech science, neuro-biology, kinesics, proxemics, and semantics, etcetera, etcetera. Repeat: all essential. Essential because, as acting teachers we presume to tinker with people's bodies and minds at a profound level. This is no place for diletantes.

I want to finish with just a few words about the specific obligations thrust upon us by our emotional and imaginative work. There are two aspects to the problem:

1) we must not emotionally damage our students; we must be able at every moment to guage the emotional impact of our work; and
2) since effective acting requires certain kinds of emotional health and freedom, we must be able to diagnose emotional dysfunction, to help when the problem lies within our range of competence, and to refer students, knowledgeably, to the proper experts when the problems go beyond our skills. (We must do such things, by the way, with exquisite tact and under the same obligations of confidentiality we expect of doctors, lawyers, and priests.)

This means that we must, in a very real sense, become Psychologists. That may sound outrageous, but I believe it. We must know what is known about human emotion, its expression, and its impacts on our

lives. This much is minimal.

Your Erroneous Zones, Born to Win, and I'm OK, You're OK are OK, even necessary, but nowhere near sufficient. They're baby steps. More like it are the monumental work by Carroll Izard, Human Emotions, and the seven volumes by Alexander Lowen, the marvelous works by Ekman and Friesen on emotional expression, etcetera. If I tried even to list the books I think you must read and the masters with whom you should study, we'd still be here late tonight. So I'll stop here.

I put it to you: as acting teachers, you elected one of the world's most difficult, dangerous, and noble professions. Your potential contribution to human growth is tremendous and so is the effort you'll have to expend if you're to do the job honorably.